



ELEMENTS OF IMMORTALITY: JOHN KEATS' ODE TO A NIGHTINGALE

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Received: 27/02/2018

Edited: 05/03/2018

Accepted: 10/03/2018

Abstract: In *Ode to a Nightingale* Keats is trying to break fresh grounds for his poetry. But before discussing the poem in detail, it is necessary to trace the roots of the sensibility of the artist. The nightingale is a bird with a long literary tradition. Keats's *Nightingale* is not only a bird of imagination, it is a real bird. The song of a bird is touching indeed.

Keywords: Ode, Bird, Sensibility, Immortal.

Introduction:

Keats' Ode to a Nightingale is a brilliant ode in English literature. Keats is trying to break fresh grounds for his poetry. But before discussing the poem in detail, it is necessary to trace the roots of the sensibility of the artist. The nightingale is a bird with a long literary tradition. From Ovid's *Metamorphosis* to T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* and beyond we have a long list of poets who indulged in giving the right kind of treatment to this immortal bird. Romantics valued spontaneous lyrical utterances of the bird on the one hand and on the other we have poets like Cowden and Clarke and Charlottee Smith who have treated the bird most prominently in their poetic outbursts. Coleridge also in his *To The Nightingale* and *The Nightingale: A Conversation Poem* has dealt largely with the spontaneous outpourings of the birds song. Keats's poem stands apart from the others by virtue of its skilful oscillation in response and its vivid patterns of contrast. Wordsworth's *The Solitary Reaper* and Shelley's *The Skylark* are attempts to capture the thrilling sensation emerging out of the melody of bird's song. In *Solitary Reaper* Wordsworth says:

No Nightingale did ever chaunt
More welcome notes to weary bands
Of travelers in some shady haunt,
Among Arabian sands:
A voice so thrilling never was heard
In spring time from the Cuckoo bird,
Breaking the silence of the seas

Among the fertherest Hebrides.

(SR 255)

Imagination:

Keats's *Nightingale* is not only a bird of imagination, it is a real bird. The poem's pattern of oscillations, its recurrent pressure towards paradox, is established in the very first stanza.

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
One minute past, and Lethe wards had sunk.

(ON 290)

The speaker is benumbed and drawn towards a deathly oblivion. It is a fact that the oblivion is apparent, but this does not necessary mean that it has been caused by grief. Surprisingly enough, it has been caused by excess of happiness of the bird's carefree song of the summer. The poet has used counterpointing technique. The early stress on drowsiness, numbness and dullness heightens by contrast, the later emphasis on the bird's freedom, joy, fluency, mobility, felicity and the bright surroundings.

The poet, then, calls for wine, a beaker full of the warm sought', that he may drink and fade away into the forest with the nightingale. In this fashion at the surface it seems that the poet tries to escape the weariness, the fever and the fret of human life with its sorrows. But he changes his mind and says that he will fly to the bird not through intoxication but through the agency of poetic imagination:

But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
Thought the dull brain perplexes and retards:
Already with the tender is the night,
And happy the Queen Moon is on her throne,
Clustered around by all her starry Fays.

(ON 291)

The poet does remain in this mental framework for a longer time. Suddenly he changes his mind with the common sense intruding his imaginative flight. He returns to reality. He is not up there amid moon and stars. He is down here in the gloom bound totally to the earth making the poetry immortal, the poetry of earth being never dead.

Death had been attacking the poet and he finds this moment particularly most opportune to die. He will be dying as he is listening to the melody of the bird's song. He wants to die in the ecstasy and thus, tries to immortalise the moment. He fails to understand with the fading of the song:

Was it a vision, or a waking dream?

Fled is that music- do I wake or sleep.

(ON 291)

After a close analysis of the poem one is confronted with exquisite art of Keats: "The transcendental and the mundane, the lofty and the earthy, have been richly contrasted yet also intermingled", (Watt 128).

The poem works admirably at all fronts. There are richer areas of awareness not only in the discussion of wine and its effect on the mind, but also in the presentation of festive pastoral joy. This joy is a kind of transformation of life into the festive joy of poet's imagination. The poem as a whole remains one of the finest dramatised meditation on man, nature, beauty and morality. "What Keats

provides is a dramatisation of the bird's cultural significance into a self aware poet of the Romantic Movement; and as Romanticism continues today so does the relevance of his Ode." Cedric Watt.

The romantic are basically faced with the dilemma of judgement in case of interplay of role of imagination in the thought process. For them actually, imagination and insight are totally inseparable and they form for all practical purposes a single faculty. "Insight both awakes the imagination to work is in turn sharpened by it when it is at work". (Bowra 7)

In this poem the dramatic opposition between the dream world of the nightingale and the actual world of the poet is described very brilliantly:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget

What thou among the leaves has never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret

Here, where men sit and hear each other groan.

The song of the Nightingale moves from the poet to the depth of his heart and creates in him a numbness similar to the drinking of hemlock. He finds that the bird lives in a place of beauty. He would like to escape from the world of caring to the world of the bird to get pleasure.

(ON 291)

Summary:

The Poetry of Keats transform the moment of ecstasy into a moment of creation. In creation there is joy and in joy there is the moment of exaltation. Keats had accepted the solid reality of life, the tragic predicament of man. He had also accepted the dialectics of life and death. The tragedy of human life has been pin pointed very minutely here.

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